

Reviews

THE ICELANDIC PHYSICAL MEDIUM INDRIDI INDRIDASON. B.
Loftur R. Gissurarson and Erlendur Haraldsson. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Volume 57, Part 214, January 1985, 54-148.

In 1905, a 22-year-old Icelandic farmhand came to Reykjavik to learn typography. Through the people with whom he was staying he chanced to visit a newly formed circle that was trying to produce table tilting. (It was said to be the first circle of its kind in Iceland.) When the newcomer was invited to participate, the table immediately began to react violently. The young man, Indridi Indridason, who is said to have known nothing of such things (despite having had some "remarkable visions"), became frightened and wanted to run out of the house. Fatefully, however, he stayed. Thus began a series of remarkable physical phenomena that lasted for almost 5 years among a group of participant-witnesses who observed and, to an increasingly sophisticated extent, controlled them. The group ceased meeting when Indridason became ill with typhoid complicated by tuberculosis, from which he died 2 years later. The report by Gissurarson and Haraldsson, based on contemporary sources, is a judicious account of the séances in which Indridason participated. Haraldsson, a professor of psychology at the University of Iceland and well known to the readers of the *Journal* for his contributions to parapsychology, had suggested the topic for Gissurarson's B.A. thesis.

Indridason was the first—and reputedly only—physical medium known in Iceland. The Experimental Society that was formed to investigate him held séances once or twice weekly, from September to June, for nearly 5 years. (The total number of séances is not stated.) At first the sittings were held at members' houses, but soon after major manifestations began, a special house was built in which to hold the séances. Apparently some phenomena, such as levitations, began to manifest themselves spontaneously, as did Indridason's trance states in which most of the phenomena took place. Other phenomena, such as apports and materializations, began only after some experimentation and "training" had been carried out. What this training consisted of is unclear; the authors of the report came across no accounts of it, and it seems possible that a good part of it was autogenic. The authors think it likely, in any case, "that during his very short career as a medium Indridason may have produced most of the phenomena of physical mediumship that are known to have been reported elsewhere" (p. 132).

The catalogue of Indridason's manifestations was reported to be as extensive, with considerable overlapping, as that of the better known medium D. D. Home. However, Indridason's manifestations included phenomena that had never been reported of Home, such as ostensible der-

terialization of a limb (although similar phenomena had been reported of other mediums). In a final appendix, Gissurarson and Haraldsson compare the séance manifestations of the two mediums. Of 107 items under 26 headings (levitations, materializations, apports, direct voice, etc.), 19 reportedly manifested by Home were not shown by Indridason (e.g., luminosity of self and objects, "earthquake effect," ringing of bells, chirping of birds), whereas 28 listed under Indridason were not produced by Home (e.g., transportation of the medium through matter, heavy objects airborne many feet without support, two voices singing at the same time). Excluding items such as the numbers of persons allowed at the séances (on occasion as many as 70 were present at Indridason's), 60 types of phenomena (e.g., loud knocks, strong gusts of wind, persons other than the mediums levitating during séances, completely materialized human forms) are listed under both.

At the beginning, the controls on the alleged phenomena, judging from what accounts remain (the Minute Books of the Society were lost in 1942), were insufficient to warrant firm conclusions, which the authors acknowledge (and as might not be too unexpected in a pickup circle of witnesses, none of whom had had experience with things that go bump in the darkness, which is where most of the reported occurrences took place). However, at the height of the manifestations, in the winter of 1908-1909, especially under the supervision of physician Gudmundur Hannesson, an arch unbeliever (later founder of the Icelandic Scientific Society) who at that time asked the Society's permission to join the investigation, the described controls left little to be desired. Apparently not all controls were in use at any one time, but they included not only the standard stripping and reclothing of the medium (who was then sewed into his garment) and minute examinations of the séance rooms, but, in addition to the holding of the arms and legs of the entranced Indridason, the holding of the holders' limbs as well. The depth of Indridason's trances was tested by his pupillary responses to light and the reactions of different parts of his face and eyelids to needle pricks. An important control measure was the fastening or painting onto all potentially moveable persons and objects in the séance room (the number of persons present was reduced early to about five) of fluorescent material purchased from abroad, presumably to make it difficult to introduce substitutions. In addition, at Hannesson's urging, a dense mesh netting was introduced and carefully nailed down, floor to ceiling and wall to wall, under strips of lathe. This rendered the part of the room in which the entranced medium and his "watchers" were stationed a separate, sealed-off compartment. At irregular times, and with the seemingly always granted permission of the "spirit" controls that soon developed, matches were lit or red darkroom lights were turned on for a few seconds to see, among other things, that no one was where one or another—and sometimes several—direct voices seemed to come from. (One control entity was about as feisty a character as has ever been reported in the mediumistic literature.) At different times, séances were held in Han-

nesson's home, with the room used chosen by him at the last minute. Séances were also held at the home of the Bishop of Iceland.

As to the possibility of conjuring, it is said that Iceland could boast of no practitioners of this art at the time, although, somewhat confusingly, it is also stated that Hannesson "was acquainted with various tricks used by conjurors for imitating the phenomena" (p. 120).

It is neither desirable nor practicable for me to try to cover all the material presented in Gissurarson and Haraldsson's excellent report. The reader is urged to consult the monograph itself and also two of the sources for it that were published in an issue of the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (Hannesson, 1924; Nielsson, 1924). One is an article by Haraldur Neilsson, a professor of theology at the University of Iceland, and the second is by Hannesson. The latter is a delightfully written account not only of the precautions taken against fraud but of the states of mind of an entrenched unbeliever as he is confronted by the almost literally maddening alternatives he is driven to entertain by way of trying to account for phenomena he knows to be impossible—such as that his close friend Neilsson, the principal "watcher" inside the net, is not only lying but even, episodically, insane. Hannesson seems to have been bothered especially by a heavy zither, treated with phosphorescent paint, that darted about the room like an agitated fly, with tunes coming from it all the while, and by the babble of male and female voices—several of them readily identifiable as particular deceased persons known to Hannesson and/or others—emanating from different parts of the room, sometimes with two of them singing a duet. Not surprisingly, this arch unbeliever explores at some length the possibilities of ventriloquism by way of trying to account for the voice phenomena. But, disconcerted though he is when he is able, on different grounds, to rule them out one by one, he never tumbles to the fact that the "projection" of the human voice—except perhaps for the creation of distance effects by having the voice grow faint—is quite impossible in the dark, where the usual behavior of the ventriloquist and his dummy in creating the illusion of projection would be quite useless. At all events, despite his being forced to accept the fact of the seemingly disembodied voices not being the medium's, Hannesson completely sidesteps the question of the nature of the personalities behind the various self-professing communicators.

Hannesson's testimony provides an intriguing glimpse into the psychology of belief—and disbelief. Despite everything he witnessed, he never relinquished his skepticism. Unlike Everard Feilding, who, faced with unassailable facts (Feilding, Baggally & Carrington, 1909), wrestled his disbelief of Eusapia Palladino's carefully controlled phenomena to the mat and emerged with an inescapable, however uncomfortable, conviction about the human (or whatever) powers that pass all understanding, Hannesson, true to the end to his unshakeable convictions about reality, remained a staunch disbeliever. "After prolonged observation," he states in his article (cited on page 121 of Gissurarson and Haraldsson's report),

I saw no way round the inference that the things move often, if not always, in an altogether unaccountable manner, without anybody's either directly or indirectly causing their movements by ordinary means. But although I cannot get away from this conclusion, I am utterly unable to bring myself to believe in it altogether. It is not easy for unbelieving people to accept the theory that inanimate things move about without any natural causes.

He remained, thus, an irremediably split mind, a counterpart, perhaps, of Neils Bohr, who was forced to postulate an irreducible duality and complementarity in the nature of light and other radiation. It must be said to Hannesson's credit, however, that he never repudiated what he claims to have observed; to the end—he later became President of the University of Iceland—he maintained (like Sir William Crookes upon his accession to the chair of the British Society) that he had nothing to retract.

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THE GHOSTS OF THE TRIANON: THE COMPLETE AN ADVENTURE BY C. A. E. MOBERLY AND E. F. JOURDAIN. Edited by Michael H. Coleman. Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England: Aquarian Press, 1988. Pp. 160. £7.99, paper. ISBN 0-85030-774-0.

It is always a benefit to psychical research when historic cases are subjected to fresh analysis, if only to see whether they stand up as well to scrutiny as some of their defenders would have us believe. This is especially so in a case as complex and baffling as Moberly and Jourdain's *An Adventure*. Since its original publication the better part of a century ago, the case has generated a vast amount of commentary, ranging from unqualified endorsement to equally unqualified rejection. Most of us who have bothered to thread our way through this considerable secondary literature, some of it quite recondite, don't know quite what to conclude, except that perhaps the final word on the matter has yet to be said. Maybe the last word has still not been said, but Michael Coleman's book, *The*

Ghosts of the Trianon, comes about as close as we are likely to get, given the present state of knowledge about the affair. Without new discoveries to breathe fresh life into the case, the ghosts of the Trianon have finally been laid to rest.

Though offering little that was not already known about Moberly and Jourdain and their *An Adventure*, Coleman has ably summarized and digested a vast amount of information about the case and the opinions surrounding it. Included are chapters on the authors, the writing, researching, and publishing of their book, initial reactions to the work in the psychical research and spiritualistic communities, subsequent responses by other researchers, and later, more detailed investigations of the book and its authors. Similar cases of so-called walk-in retrocognition are reviewed, followed by a final summary and appraisal of the evidence in the case. Concluding the work is a bibliography of some 105 items, followed by a helpful appendix listing the various editions and contents of *An Adventure*. All in all, the book is a well-organized and concise summary of all that is known about Moberly and Jourdain's *Adventure* and the reactions it has elicited since its initial publication in 1911.

Much of the material reviewed by Coleman consists of a mass of details that do not lend themselves well to summary, as anyone will realize who has read some of the more elaborate commentaries on the case. Briefly, though, Coleman recounts the story as told by Moberly and Jourdain—who, during a visit to the Palace of Versailles in 1901, reported undergoing a strange experience. While touring the Petit Trianon, the house and gardens that Louis XVI had given to Marie Antoinette in 1774, both ladies reported seeing and hearing things that seemed oddly “out of place”—the sounds of music with no musicians in evidence, people dressed in antique costumes, and most of all, a feeling of “dreary unnatural depression” that lasted the whole tour. They, however, thought little of the experience until, in the course of conversation, they noticed a curious discrepancy in their recollections: Miss Moberly remembered a woman sitting below the terrace of the Petit Trianon, whereas Miss Jourdain insisted that she had seen no one in that location; in fact, she was quite certain that no such person had been there at the time. Thinking that the experience may well have been stranger than either had initially supposed, they resolved to write independent accounts of what each could remember, without further consultation. They also agreed to investigate the history of the place and to revisit it again at the earliest opportunity. Much to their surprise, they discovered that the scene was now significantly different from what they remembered—buildings and topography had changed, and the people they now saw appeared normal in dress and behavior. Further research in historical records, however, revealed that the Petit Trianon and its grounds had indeed once looked much as they remembered it—in the late 18th century, during the lifetime of Queen Marie Antoinette.

This story has given rise to a considerable secondary literature, of which Coleman's book is the best and perhaps final addition. In it he